

OASIS OF BISKRA PARIS OF SAHARA

Frank Carpenter Writes About
the Life and Nature of This
Interesting Spot.

SOCIAL CAPITAL OF DESERT

Its Gambling Resorts and Its
Camel Races—Bible Charac-
ters in the Holy Oasis.

I AM AT Biskra, the Paris of the Sahara. This oasis lies 175 miles south of the Mediterranean Sea, in the midst of the desert. At one side of it great sand dunes roll on and on until they are lost in the yellow horizon. On the other are the well-worn stones of the Oued, or dry river, Biskra, which becomes a flood during the short rainy part of the year, but which is now so parched under this African sun that it would blister your bare feet to cross it.

Biskra is situated on a low plateau, a little more than three hundred feet above the river. To the north of it is the mighty wall of the Atlas mountains, which here rise a thousand feet higher than Mount Washington. In this African sun they are now of a pale yellow, the color of the limestone of which they are made. At this hour they will turn to a hazy blue, changing as the sun drops to primrose and gold, and then dying out through a dark purple into the night.

Biskra is an island in this mighty sea of the Sahara. The mountain wall is a part of the shore of that sea, and the great cliffs rise almost straight up over it. If one had a glass and would cast his eye along those mountains he would find a break at the right, known as the Gorge of Kantara. It is there that a river has burst through the wall, forming the golden path to this great desert oasis. One comes right out of the mountains into the desert, and as he does so goes through the little oasis of Kantara, which serves as it were, as the green key to that great golden door.

The Garden of Allah.
Biskra has been rather voluptuously described in the novel called "The Garden of Allah." Under another name it is made the chief scene of that story, and all of its surroundings are painted in more or less glowing colors. They are, as a rule, grossly overdrawn, and the tale itself has a mawkish, sentimental quality which leaves a bad taste in one's mouth. According to it, the Desert of Sahara is the Garden of Allah and Biskra its capital. It is the European capital in reality. It is the only part of this vast waste of sand which can be safely and comfortably reached by Europeans, and every winter tourists and healthseekers by the thousands come here over the railroad which the French have built. Large hotels have been erected for them, and one can live here comfortably at from two to five dollars per day. There are altogether a half dozen hotels and, in addition, a casino and theatre. There are frequent concerts and cafe chantants, while the casino steadily runs its roulette and rouge, and its tables, so that the place might be called the Monte Carlo of the Sahara as well.

Horse and Camel Races.

The season begins in November and lasts until May. It is at its liveliest in February, at the time of the races, when horses, donkeys and camels take part. At that time there are long distance camel races run by Arabs on the banks of the Oued, which can make twelve or fifteen miles in an hour. These camels are so tall and lean that they seem to be all legs. They have saddles with their supports in front and behind, and the rider bobs up and down with a seaway corresponding to the ticking of your watch. The starting point is supposed to be the oasis of Touggourt, which is two hundred and ten miles away, and a fairly good camel ought to cover the ground in less than a day.

The horse races are with Arabian breeds and the riders are Arabs who in their fight might even rival President Roosevelt, and who delight in cross-country going, jumping everything on the way.

In French Biskra.

The city of Biskra is composed of two towns. One is known as French Biskra and the other Old Biskra. The former contains about 900 Europeans and two or three times that many natives, while the latter is altogether native and is numbered more by the number of palm trees it owns than by the number of its inhabitants. It is comprised in six little mud villages scattered throughout plantations which support about 150,000 date trees.

The French town is surrounded by walls and entered by gates. It has several wide streets, the chief of which is the Rue Bortha, which runs from the railroad station past the public gardens and on out toward the oasis of Touggourt. It goes by the oasis of Old Biskra, which is two miles off, and upon it is a street car line over which one can ride the whole of that distance for two cents. Another car line will take him to the hot springs, and a half mile away for the same money, and this is far down in the Desert of Sahara, in the very backwoods of the globe. The two-cent rate is made without tickets, and it is less than half the nickel which we pay at home.

I shall send this letter to the United States for a five-cent postage stamp, and I can telegraph from here across

STRIKING SCENES IN OASIS OF BISKRA, THE PARIS OF THE SAHARA DESERT



A RIVAL OF
MONTICELLI

the Mediterranean to Paris for less than you can send a message from New York to Chicago. My cab rides cost me thirty cents or fifty cents an hour; and if I prefer to move about on camel the rate will be about \$1 per day.

With the French Soldiers.

Biskra is under military government. It is the chief station of the eastern Sahara, and it is called the Terroir de Commandement. One sees French soldiers everywhere, and there are French officers at the hotels and on the streets. They are the fine-looking fellows and far different from our ordinary idea of the French army. They are straight, broad-shouldered, bronzed men, who have seen fighting with the tribes of the desert, and show it. Some of the officers have the appearance of felines, and they are noted for their politeness, but no one dares to presume upon their weakness.

The territory of Biskra is about as large as the State of Ohio, and it has a population of less than one hundred thousand, all told. The natives live in a number of oases scattered here and there over the desert. Biskra itself is commanded by a major, assisted by a captain, three lieutenants and a military interpreter. In the other oases there are captains, lieutenants and interpreters. The town has electric lights and it has schools for both French and Arabs. It has a negro quarter as well.

The French city is made up of flat-roofed white houses of one or two stories. Many of the roofs have walls about them, and the women and children play on the roofs in the evening, and the people often sleep there at night.

I wish I could take a walk with you through one of these Sahara towns. Even in French Biskra, the scenes would seem strange. There are Moors who sit right out in the street, or upon the sidewalks, upon mats which

they have laid down for the purpose, and they sit as high as a footstool, and thus sitting, with their bare feet under them, they will move the blocks for an hour or more without saying a word. Many of the players are gray-headed and gray-headed, but age does not seem to affect their love for the game.

Some Bible Characters.

Everywhere I go here I meet the characters of the Scriptures. As I write these notes I can see in one group an old Abraham with the aged Sarah beside him and his buxom Hagar behind him. The little baby in Hagar's arms might have been young Ishmael, and I observe that Abraham looks upon him with love. At the same time Sarah seems to be jealous, and glares at her baby and mother out of the tail of her eye.

That Moor coming down the street might be Joseph, the friend of King Pharaoh. Observe his costly raiment of fine silk and gold, and his sword and his turban, and he is evidently a man of authority.

On that donkey trotting towards us is an old man whom one might easily imagine to be Balaam, and to the key stops and opens his mouth and brays. His message, however, we do not understand, for he has not the power of speech as had the ass of the Scriptures. And so I might go on finding a character at every step which would correspond to one in the Bible. This is the Simon-pure Orient, where the natives are about the same to-day as they were three or four or more thousand years since. They are all Mohammedans, and believe only in Allah and the prophet.

How the Oasis Is Watered.

But let us go out to the oasis and visit the people who live under the palm trees. We drive along the Rue Bortha by walls of yellow mud inclosing date trees which rise high above them and are loaded with ripe yellow fruit. The walls are as high as my head, and on their top dried thorn bushes have been set in a white mud was still water, protecting the fruit like so much broken glass.

The gates to these gardens are rude doors of palm wood, and the only openings are through drains seen here and there where the water flows in or out. This oasis is fed by springs from the River Biskra, which is dry the greater part of the year. Wells have tapped the springs, and there is a flow of several thousand gallons a minute. The water is somewhat alkaline, but it puts the sugar into the dates and the sun is so hot that the fruit is delicious. According to the Arabs, to make good dates the hot of the sun must be in the burning sun the greater part of the year. The thermometer here even in midwinter never falls below sixty,

and the climate seems just right, although it is not so at Kantara, which is thirty or forty miles farther north. Biskra is annually producing something like 10,000,000 pounds of dates, enough to furnish a handful to every boy in the United States and leave some to spare.

As we ride on into the oasis we can see men picking the dates, or rather cutting them off. They are in enormous bunches, and a good tree will produce on the average about 120 pounds annually. The fruit is not good until it is dead ripe. I bit into some green dates to-day and they puckered my mouth like unfrosted persimmons.

In Old Biskra.

I have already written of the oases of Figuig and Taria. Biskra is somewhat like them, but it is the center of an Ohio township, and it is altogether about six miles in length. It is divided up into little fields of garden patches, each of which is surrounded by these mud walls of sun-dried brick. There are no pavements. The streets are dirt roads, with here and there a wide irrigation stream running through and with bridges of palm wood crossing it at intervals every few feet. There are villages scattered throughout the oasis. Each of these is entered by a low gate made of mud bricks and palms, and this gate is always closed at night. The houses are mostly mud built with flat roofs. There is some rain here, and the water runs from the roof through pipes which extend out into the street, giving one a douche on the turban or down the neck of one's gown.

I understand that the water supply is comparatively scanty; that water rights are sold in perpetuity and that there are also leases at so much per year, and even at so much per hour. Not long ago one paid \$200 for a perpetual stream half an inch wide and as deep as the rainfall would stand, for \$300 for a stream of four inches. Where the water is let out by the hour so often per week an Arab watchman stands at the hole where it flows out with an hour glass, and when the sand has run through shuts off the supply.

A Dreary Life.

I cannot describe the dreariness of common everyday life in these Saharan oases. Almost the only green thing one sees in the streets is the palm leaves overhead. Inside a garden there may be patches of vegetables and grass with trees bearing various kinds of fruit, but in the villages themselves everything is as bare as the middle of the road, and that in a land which might be a tropical paradise. The houses have no gardens in or about them. They are joined close together, and are more like a catcomb than a place where people live, move and have their being. There are few signs

of life during much of the day. There are no windows facing the streets, and the only means of ventilation on that side of the house are little holes about the size of a paving brick up near the roof.

In villages like these people look equally as dirty, but the dirtiest of them are loaded with jewelry.

I photographed one middle-aged dame of a swarthy complexion who had earrings as big as an after-dinner feeble's saucer, and she turned around I noticed that she wore anklets of white metal as wide as a tin cup is high. Indeed, they looked like tin cups without bottoms or handles. Even the children were loaded with jewelry. Some of them were not averse to being photographed, although both women and children held out their hands for money as soon as their pictures were taken.

As I walked through the town I passed several Moorish coffee houses, in which were Arabs sitting on the floor, smoking and chatting, drinking coffee and playing dominoes. The coffee houses look not unlike an American stable. Their only light comes in through the door and the people sit on the mud floor.

The Chateau Landon.

In "The Garden of Allah," the novel which I referred to in the beginning of this letter, some vivid descriptions are made of the Chateau Landon, a wonderful date plantation belonging to a wealthy French nobleman. If one would know how much water means in the desert he may learn by visiting this place. It contains about fifteen acres, and is a wonderful botanical garden right here on the edge of the desert. It is a date forest interspersed with all sorts of tropical and temperate fruit trees and shrubs. There are green hedges fifteen feet high, as carefully trimmed as those in the botanical gardens of Algiers, or in that of Bulenzore, Java. About twenty Arab gardeners are always busy keeping the plantation in order, and the leaves are not allowed to lie on the paths. Here and there through the garden are houses of Arab architecture, the homes of the owner, and in one place there is a great circle cut out under the trees where dances may be held in the open air.

Sidi Okba and His Oasis.

Have you ever heard of Sidi Okba? He was a famous Arab general who conquered the whole of North Africa from the Nile to the Atlantic about 1,300 odd years ago. All whom he conquered he converted by killing them, and they must die if they did not espouse the Mohammedan religion; and it is said that when he reached the western ocean he rode into it exclaiming that if it were not for this barrier he would make every people of the lands beyond worship Allah or die. This man was one of the great Mohammedan heroes. The people look upon him as a saint, and have named towns, oases and other places after him. One of the most important of these is Sidi Okba, which lies twelve miles from here, in the heart of the desert. In it is the shrine of the saint, and the mosque containing it is said to be the oldest Mohammedan building in Africa. The town is the religious capital of this part of the world, so holy that the people in pilgrimages to it as they do to the Kaifoun, in Tunis, and to Mecca and Medina, in Arabia.

I rode across the desert this afternoon and visited it. The way is over a sandy plain, with a scanty vegetation of thorny scrub, through sandy and stony wastes, and by the oases of Pithach and Chetma. Sidi Okba itself has 65,000 palm trees, and the town has several thousand people. The plantations are surrounded by mud walls like those of Biskra, but the houses are better and some of the streets are so wide that one can drive through them. On our way there we passed some caravans of camels and donkeys. We saw many tent villages and great flocks of black goats watched by shepherds.

The Business of an Oasis.

Entering the gate, we rode between the mud walls to the public square, which is surrounded by petty stores or bazaars. Every store is a box-like room no wider than the door which leads into it, and so low that the merchant, who hardly stands upright at night. The stores are lighted from the front, and the customers stand in the street as they bargain.

There was considerable industry going on. The men were weaving, they were making plows and farther on saddles. In the street of the tailors I saw several men using American sewing machines, but nowhere did I see any American goods. On the sides of the streets were mud ledges built out from the mud walls. These ledges were filled with white gowned men chatting or sleeping. Some were reclining on cushions, and at night the ledges are filled with sleepers.

Many of these poorer Arabs have no homes. They eat at the cafes and sleep in the streets. This is especially so of the slaves. The men always sleep with their heads covered, and, in fact, with every bit of bare skin hidden. One reason for this is on account of the flies. They fairly swarm in all the oases, making one's nose for the Caliph Adamele, the father of flies, to breathe upon them and drive them away. This old Caliph had a breath so fatal to flies that every one dropped dead that flew over his mouth.

During my stay I visited the famous mosque. It is an ordinary building with perhaps a half dozen rooms, including the place of worship. It was filled with Mohammedans when I entered it. This afternoon, and I heard the Mohammedan youths singing out verses from the Koran in the school-rooms on each side. I spent a while watching the men in the mosque, and although I was not a Moslem, and a Christian, I was not molested.

FRANK G. CARPENTER.

Sailors' Superstitions.

Birds, as inhabitants of the air, were naturally chosen by the ancients as omens and augurs of future happenings. The sensitiveness to atmospheric changes shown by many birds aided in establishing these notions. The real indications often furnished by sea birds of a coming storm or calm were doubtless magnified by the anxious, superstitious sailor. These indications, he explained, seldom precede the atmospheric changes more than a few hours.

The custom of hanging the sea swallow so that the bill may point to the wind arose from the old-time custom of suspending the bird by the feet, expecting it would renew its feathers as if alive. Divination by the flight of birds was a favorite method in the olden times; sailors watched their flight for indications of prospective voyages and favorable winds as they were thought to fly through the air to heaven, they easily became messengers of the will of the gods.

The albatross is believed by Jack Tar to sleep on the winds. It was at one time thought that the petrel hatched its eggs under its wings.

The fishhawk was esteemed a bringer of good luck; it boded good or evil as its cry was to the right or left. There was an old superstition that gulls were never seen bleeding. Shooting stars were then supposed to be the half digested food of winter gulls.

Overdoing.

You overeat if your food is not honestly earned. You overstrain if your mortgage is a wake and growing. You overtalk if you have time to waste or gossip. You overwork if you meddle with the affairs of other people.—American Agriculturist.

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